



David Werther
UNIVERSITY OF
WISCONSIN-MADISON, USA

Calvinism and Middle Knowledge

Abstract

In his recent work, *Providence and Prayer*, Terrance Tiessen considers a variety of views on divine providence ranging from those in which God's sovereignty is a risky business to so-called no-risk views. Tiessen tentatively settles on a no-risk view he dubs 'A Middle Knowledge Calvinist Model of Providence.' I argue that, given a compatibilist account of free will, an essential feature of Calvinism, there is no room for the threefold distinction between God's natural, middle, and free knowledge. The knowledge a Calvinist God possesses must be entirely free knowledge or entirely natural knowledge.

1 Introduction

In his recent work, *Providence and Prayer*,¹ Terrance Tiessen considers a variety of views on divine providence ranging from those in which God's sovereignty is a risky business to so-called no-risk views, in which God's providence is meticulous. Tiessen tentatively settles on a no-risk view he dubs 'A Middle Knowledge Calvinist Model of Providence.' As the name suggests, God possesses knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, as in Molinist accounts of providence, but this creaturely freedom is compatibilist, as in Calvinist models of providence. While Tiessen sees middle-knowledge Calvinism as best satisfying the demands of Scripture, reason, and experience, with a refreshing spirit of humility, he anticipates 'growth in my own understanding through interaction with thoughtful readers' (25).²

My aim here is to contribute to that thought-provoking interaction. I focus on the internal coherence of middle-knowledge Calvinism, as opposed to its compatibility with Scripture and experience. Unless middle-knowledge Calvinism is internally consistent, its consistency with Scripture and experience is irrelevant. My thesis is that, given a compatibilist account of free will, an essential feature of Calvinism, there is no room for the threefold distinction between God's natural, middle, and free knowledge: God's knowledge of counterfactuals of freedom must be entirely free knowledge or entirely natural knowledge.

2 Tiessen's View

Tiessen begins his account of middle-knowledge Calvinism with a superb summary of the view.

1. Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 2000).
2. All parenthetical page references to *Providence and Prayer*.

God is comprehensively in control of the world, accomplishing purposes that he has determined in eternity. Because his will is always accomplished, it is evident that God's creatures (human and angelic) do not have libertarian freedom. This is a compatibilist account that affirms both meticulous providence and human freedom of a spontaneous or voluntary kind. This model is less certain than the traditional Calvinist model that God is absolutely timeless because of a concern that such a concept may not do justice to God's highly relational personal being. In a significant sense, God is not only determining human history, he is responding to his creatures within it. This divine responsiveness is facilitated by God's knowledge of how creatures would act in particular circumstances (so called 'middle knowledge'). God not only knows the actual future, he has determined that future. But in order to do this, God needed to know how his creatures would respond to situations, including their response to his own persuasions or actions. God can know this because his creatures are not libertarianly free and he must know this in order to plan how he will act to bring about his purposes. With simple foreknowledge God would know the future but would be unable to do anything about it. With 'middle knowledge' God is able to plan and then to accomplish his plan without violating the responsible freedom he has given to his creatures. (289–290)

The core of Tiessen's account is the rejection of libertarian freedom in favor of compatibilist freedom, and simple foreknowledge in favor of middle knowledge.

Tiessen characterizes libertarian freedom as '... the state of freedom in which there is a real possibility that one could make at least two different choices in exactly the same circumstances' (366). In contrast, on a compatibilist account

... a person can act freely even though that action is determined by God... actions are free if the actors do them voluntarily, spontaneously, willingly, without coercion by anything outside of themselves... (365)

On a libertarian view of freedom, Calvin freely wrote *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* only if he could have done otherwise, say, in the very same circumstances written a book on French cuisine or spent his time sketching caricatures of well known Pelagians. On a compatibilist view of freedom, Calvin freely wrote *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* if that is what he wanted to do and was determined to do so. On this view, Calvin's freedom would be intact, despite the fact that in the circumstances in which he wrote he could not have researched French cuisine, sketched cartoons for the editorial page of 'The Geneva Evening Post,' or done anything else.

In order for God to exercise providential direction it is not enough for God to know, before the creation of the heavens and the earth, that Calvin will write *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* or that Jacobus Arminius would not be a champion of the doctrine of irresistible grace. With such 'simple foreknowledge' '... a knowledge of the one future that will actually happen but not knowledge of the other possibilities that might have occurred if the circumstances were different' (367) future events like Arminius' views regarding the possibility of falling from grace, would not have taken God by surprise. However, God could not have

known whether there were other circumstances in which Jacobus would have been a staunch defender of irresistible grace. Hence, had God wanted Arminius to teach the impossibility of falling from grace, God could not have arranged it. Simple foreknowledge is simply inadequate for such arrangements.

Suppose that God's creative choice were based upon God's knowledge of how free agents would choose in any and all circumstances. If that were so, then God would know, in what circumstances, if any, Jacobus Arminius would have cherished all five petals of the Calvinist 'TULIP', John Calvin would have become an Anabaptist, and the like. Luis de Molina contrasted this divine knowledge of counterfactuals of human freedom with God's natural knowledge and free knowledge.

God's natural knowledge is knowledge of necessary truths, propositions whose truth is independent of the divine will, for example, *A tulip with five petals has more than two petals; If God exists 'outside of time' then God cannot possess foreknowledge, and There is a possible world in which Clark Pinnock is a Calvinist.* God's free knowledge is knowledge of those contingent truths that depend solely upon God's will for their truth, for example, *God created the heavens and the earth.* God's knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom falls between natural knowledge and free knowledge, and so takes the name 'middle knowledge'.

Tiessen notes that middle knowledge is associated with a libertarian view of freedom, but maintains that the two are incompatible. On Tiessen's understanding of libertarianly free choices, such choices are indeterminate and hence not even an omniscient being could know what libertarian agents might choose to do, 'By definition of the terms it is impossible to know what a person would decide to do in a given situation if the person's decision is conceived to be indeterministically free' (317). However, on a compatibilist account, free choices are determined. Therefore the counterfactual choices of compatibilist agents are known to God.

... I believe that a knowledge of the future, contingent, purely hypothetical events is only available to God. . . where free selves determine their actions in ways that implement all of their selfhood. If one knows all of the factors of the situation in which the person will make a decision, one can predict what that decision will be. (317)

Further, were God to lack such Calvinist middle knowledge, it would be a mistake to speak of either human freedom or divine wisdom.

If God simply decided the future in one logical moment without regard to the possible responses of creatures to his own initiatives and the wisest responses he could make to those creaturely decisions, then any appearance of significance in those human actions is thoroughly illusory. (319)

In sum, as Tiessen sees it, if divine providence is to be meaningful, free creatures must be compatibilistically free, and God must know the truth value of each and every counterfactual of creaturely freedom.

3 Discussion

Suppose then that compatibilism is the right account of freedom. Assume as well that J.I. Packer is asked to join a fusion jazz band and accepts. Call the state of affairs containing all that determines Packer's acceptance, A, and the state of affairs constituting his acceptance J. On a Calvinist account of meticulous providence and freedom, I take it that A will include, among other things, God's decree and some desires and/or reasons of Packer's. If so, then so long as God is an immaterial agent and Packer is not identical to his body, it follows that the determination of Packer's acceptance cannot be merely a matter of causal, that is, physical necessity. Physical states of affairs may be included in A and J but do not exhaust A and J.

Since Packer's acceptance, J, is a determined choice, Packer could not have failed to accept given A, the state of affairs constituting all that determines his acceptance. To maintain otherwise would be to affirm a libertarian liberty of indifference. Expressed more precisely, every possible world W including state of affairs A, the state of affairs containing all that determines Packer's decision to join a fusion jazz band, also includes J, the state of affairs constituting Packer's acceptance of the invitation to join the band. And, if this is so, then among Packer's essential properties is the property of responding affirmatively if A obtains.

If it is not possible that A obtain and Packer decline, then it is impossible for *If A then J* to have a true antecedent and false consequent. Hence, *If A then not J* is necessarily false. If this account of Packer's nature and counterfactuals of freedom is correct, then similar analyses could be given for BB.Warfield, Charlie Yarbird Parker, Gregory Boyd, Bono, and every other possibly free creature, and possible creaturely choice.

It is important to note that some of Tiessen's remarks regarding libertarianism and creaturely freedom appear to have implications for the freedom of the Creator as well. As Tiessen sees it, unless the 'contributing factors' of an agent's choice are sufficient for that choice and no other, intentionality is undermined and the agent's choice is arbitrary.

Granted, there are many contributing factors or 'reasons' but, since the sum total of them is insufficient [on a libertarian view] to explain this choice rather than that one, the decision appears to be 'random.' I see no way to escape that conclusion. . . [313]

Since random or arbitrary providence is a contradiction in terms, it seems that in order for there to be meticulous divine providence, the sum total of the reasons for God's creative decision must have been sufficient for that decision and no other.

Suppose, as Tiessen does, that God's creative decision is based upon divine knowledge of the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. Recall that such compatibilist counterfactuals (claims like 'If J.I. Packer were asked to join a fusion jazz band, he would accept') are, if true, necessarily true. Call the state of affairs that God chooses to instantiate (and count noninstantiation as a vacuous case of instantiation), based upon knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, 'Lapsaria.' And let t_2 be the time God instantiates Lapsaria.

Given that God is omniscient by nature, at no time could God lack knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. Hence at t_1 God has knowledge of the creaturely counterfactuals. On the supposition that such knowledge (the reasons for God's creative choice) is sufficient for the instantiation of Lapsaria (and no other world) at t_2 , God could not have done other than instantiate Lapsaria. If so, then God exists in only one possible world and therefore every property God possesses is an essential property. And, if all of God's properties are essential, then every true claim about God's actions is a necessary truth, and thus outside of God's control. It appears then that rather than explaining God's meticulous providence, Calvinist middle knowledge explains it away.

There is more at stake here than just the possibility of Calvinist middle knowledge. If my critique of Calvinist middle knowledge is correct, it is so because it shows that Calvinist assumptions lead to a sort of fatalistic necessity, that is, rob God and other agents of any responsibility for their actions. Thus the critique would undercut a more traditional Calvinist view, as well as the new model Tiessen proposes.

The charge of fatalism is a serious one, and, as Tiessen notes, one that is often brought against Calvinist accounts of providence. In distinguishing genuine freedom from fatalism, Tiessen sites John Feinberg's distinction between absolute necessity and consequent necessity (245) and Paul Helm's distinction between divinely decreed means and ends (237).

He [Feinberg] also [i.e. in addition to John Frame] takes a soft determinist or compatibilist position, which differs from hard determinist positions, some of which might be fatalistic, that is they would argue that God had no choice in what he did.

In distinction from the 'absolute necessity' of the fatalist model, Feinberg posits 'consequent necessity,' which holds that 'once certain choices are made (by God or whomever) certain things follow as a consequence. But before these choices are made, no inherent necessity dictates what must be chosen.' An action is defined as 'free' even if it is causally determined so long as the causes are *nonconstraining*. On this reading, God's decree includes 'whatever circumstances and factors are necessary to convince an individual (without constraint) that the act God decreed is the act she or he wants to do. And, given the sufficient conditions, the person will do the act.' (245–246)

Paul Helm maintains that God's omnicausality would be fatalistic 'only if God decreed ends without decreeing any or all of the means to those ends, or if God's will was itself fated.' But God ordains means as well as ends and employs our causal powers so that their voluntariness and spontaneity as well as our responsibility are not overridden. (237)

Suppose that an agent's causal powers are nonconstrained if and only if the agent's causal powers do not obtain by 'inherent necessity' (cf. Feinberg) and are 'voluntary' and 'spontaneous' (cf. Helm), and that an action that is determined by nonconstrained causal powers is a free action. Assume as well, that the following conditional is true, *If Clark Pinnock were to give the Didsbury lectures, he would entitle his talks 'The Most Moved Mover'*.

If the state of affairs described in the antecedent is one in which Professor Pinnock's causal powers are nonconstrained, the conditional is an instance of consequent necessity. But, if the state of affairs described in the antecedent is inherently necessary, then the conditional is an instance of absolute necessity, and Clark is fated to entitle his talks 'The Most Moved Mover.'

The key issue then in determining whether or not Professor Pinnock's choice of titles is fated, is to determine whether or not the state of affairs in which he chooses is inherently necessary. Suppose that it is up to God whether or not Pinnock delivers the Didsbury lectures. Consider the following two claims.

If God so chooses, then Professor Pinnock delivers the Didsbury lectures.

The reasons for God's choices are found in the divine nature and are such that if God chooses X, then God's reasons are sufficient for X and no other choice.

Tiessen's commitment to meticulous providence requires the truth of the first claim. With regard to the second, if more than one creative decision were compatible with God's nature, then God would have possessed liberty of indifference regarding creation. But as Tiessen sees it liberty of indifference results in arbitrary choices and therefore is incompatible with providence. So, Tiessen must affirm the second claim as well. However, if both claims are true then it seems that Pinnock's delivery of the Didsbury lectures is dictated by the divine nature and therefore is matter of inherent necessity. Hence, in the end, the distinctions drawn from Feinberg and Helm do not seem to save Calvinism from collapsing into fatalism.

One might suggest that fatalism can easily be avoided by dropping the requirement that nonconstraining causes must not be inherently necessary. Thus, one might suggest that an agent's action is free, even if the relevant causal powers obtain by virtue of inherent necessity, so long as the causal powers are voluntary and spontaneous. Further, one might argue that if the causal powers that give rise to an agent's actions are part of that agent's nature, then they are necessarily spontaneous and voluntary, and so the agent's action is a paradigm case of genuine freedom. On this view, constraint is possible only if the determining states of affairs are not a part of the agent's nature.

In accordance with this perspective, allow that God's creative choice is genuinely free though the reasons for it are found in the divine nature and are sufficient for no other choice. And, as before, suppose God instantiates Lapsaria at t_2 . Since the sufficient reasons for the instantiation of Lapsaria (and no other world) at t_2 are found in God's nature, it seems that the instantiation of Lapsaria at t_2 is itself one of God's essential properties. This is so for whatever necessarily follows from the set of essential properties is itself an essential property. Assuming then that God is responsible for the instantiation of Lapsaria at t_2 , it follows that God is responsible for one of the essential divine properties. But that is absurd. No being can be responsible for a property it could not exist without.

It may seem puzzling to refer to the property of instantiating Lapsaria at t_2 as a property that God could not exist without. After all there was a time, t_1 , when

God lacked that property. It may appear then that this property is not one of God's essential properties and therefore there is nothing problematic about holding God responsible for it.³

On the contrary, I believe that a being can possess a property essentially, notwithstanding the fact that it does not always possess it. Suppose, for example, that in every possible world in which Charles is a member, Charles possesses property *p* at *t*₁ and lacks it at *t*₂. If so, then there is no world in which Charles exists and fails to have *p* at *t*₁ and lack it at *t*₂. It follows from this that the possession of *p* at *t*₁ is one of Charles' essential properties, even though he lacks *p* at *t*₂.

On the assumption then that God has the property of instantiating Lapsaria at *t*₂ and lacks it at *t*₁, it does not follow that this property is an accidental property. And, given the assumption that the sufficient reasons for the instantiation of Lapsaria (and no other world) at *t*₂, are found in God's nature, it seems that the instantiation of Lapsaria at *t*₂ is one of God's essential properties.

On the supposition that God exists necessarily, all true claims about God's essential properties are necessary truths. Hence 'God instantiates Lapsaria at *t*₂' is necessarily true. On the supposition that God exists contingently, 'Either God does not exist or God instantiates Lapsaria at *t*₂' is necessarily true. In either case it appears that God could be responsible for the existence of Lapsaria at *t*₂ only if God could be responsible for necessary truths.

It could be up to God whether or not 'God instantiates Lapsaria at *t*₂' is necessarily true only if propositions do not possess their modalities with necessity. If this were so, then it would also be up to God whether or not *A tulip with five petals has more than two petals* were true and *If God exists outside of time then God lacks foreknowledge* were false. However, if all such modal matters were under God's control, and the distinctions between natural, middle, and free knowledge retained any significance, it would follow that all of God's knowledge is free knowledge.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, Terrance Tiessen proposes for discussion a new no-risk model of providence, middle-knowledge Calvinism. I've argued that given a Calvinist account of freedom, God's knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom must be entirely natural or entirely free. I will have achieved some measure of success, if I have provided some of the thoughtful interaction Professor Tiessen intended to stimulate.⁴

3. I owe this objection to an anonymous referee.

4. As always I am grateful to Mark Linville for many helpful comments and suggestions. I also wish that thank the referees for their helpful comments and questions.